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An analysis of stress, burnout, and work commitment among disability support staff in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has suggested that challenging behaviour emitted by persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities negatively impacts upon the levels of stress and burnout of those who support and care for them. In the current study a sample of disability support workers in the UK ($N = 138$) reported their levels of perceived stress, burnout, and commitment to their work. The relationship between the frequency and severity of aggressive/destructive behaviours to which they were exposed, and these three measures were examined. Results showed that participants scored lower on measures of burnout in the current study than has been reported by similar research studies in the UK and North America. The results revealed an association between challenging behaviours experienced and participants' perceived stress and emotional exhaustion. Perceived stress and burnout were also associated with participants' commitment to their work. Finally, a series of regression analyses identified a number of predictors of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment among disability support workers. The results and their implications for the consideration of disability support worker wellbeing and future research in this area are discussed.

Disability support workers play a vital role in the lives of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. A disability support worker "assists the [individual] to lead a self-directed life and to contribute to his/her community; and encourages attitudes and behaviours that enhance inclusion in his/her community" (Taylor, Bradley, & Warren, 1996, p. 36). Fulfilling these responsibilities involves supporting clients with a wide variety of personal care activities and daily living skills, and promoting their relationship with their families and communities (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). However, research suggests that high levels of stress and burnout (e.g., Hatton et al., 1999; Rose & Rose, 2005; Robertson et al., 2005) exist among disability support workers potentially compromising the quality of care available to persons with intellectual disabilities.

Stress among disability support workers is likely to play a role in the high rates of turnover and absenteeism observed in this population (Hatton & Emerson, 1993; Hewitt & Larson, 2007; Rose, 1995) and may impact upon the quality of care provided to clients (Lawson & O'Brien, 1994; Rose, Jones, & Fletcher, 1998). Research has identified both protective and risk factors for stress and burnout among disability support workers. These include factors relating to personal characteristics such as coping style, work-home conflict, and social support (Devereux, Hastings, Noone, Firth, & Totsika, 2009; Hatton et al.,

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1999; Jenkins, Rose, & Lovell, 1997; Mitchell & Hastings, 2001; Vassos & Nankervis, 2012), organizational characteristics such as role ambiguity or role conflict, job status, job demands, limited opportunities for career progression, and influence over decisions (Hatton, Brown, Caine, & Emerson, 1995; Hatton et al., 1999; Jenkins et al., 1997; Vassos & Nankervis, 2012), and client characteristics including poor client skills and engagement in challenging behaviour (Hatton et al., 1995; Hensel, Lunsky, & Dewa, 2012; Vassos & Nankervis, 2012).

Challenging behaviour is behaviour "of such intensity, frequency, duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit the use of, or result in the person being denied access to, ordinary facilities" (Emerson, 2001, p. 3). Topographies of challenging behaviour including aggression, self-injurious behaviour, and stereotyped behaviour are highly prevalent among persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (e.g., Lundqvist, 2013; Murphy, Healy, & Leader, 2009; Poppes, van der Putten, & Vlaskamp, 2010). Previous research suggests that disability support workers perceive externally directed behaviours, such as aggression, destructive and disruptive behaviours, as more challenging than behaviours which are self-directed or less impactful on the external environment, such as self-injurious behaviours and repetitive stereotyped behaviour (Elgie & Hastings, 2002). The prevalence of aggressive or destructive behaviours among persons with intellectual disabilities reported in the literature ranges from 34.4% (Lundqvist, 2013) to 51.8% (Crocker et al., 2006). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that disability support workers report frequently witnessing, or experiencing, such behaviours in their work setting (Hensel et al., 2012; Strand, Benzein, & Saveman, 2004).

Previous research suggests that the experience of such behaviours negatively impacts upon disability support workers' wellbeing and their perceptions of their work. Freeman (1994) assessed the impact of staff exposure to challenging behaviour on perceived stress and rapport with clients. Challenging behaviour was found to be a significant predictor of stress among participants, explaining 18–21% of the variance in participants' perceived stress. Greater exposure to challenging behaviour was also associated with more negative perceptions of clients. Jenkins et al. (1997) compared the psychological wellbeing of disability support workers who supported clients with significant challenging behaviour with that of disability support workers who supported clients who did not engage in challenging behaviour. Results showed that support workers who frequently encountered challenging behaviour presented with significantly higher anxiety, felt less supported, and had lower job satisfaction. A review by Hastings (2002) concluded that there exists a significant body of evidence supporting an association between exposure to challenging behaviour and disability support workers' self-reported feelings of stress. However, Hastings (2002) highlighted the importance of further examination of this relationship and of potential moderator or mediator variables. He also emphasized the importance of utilizing more sophisticated measures of challenging behaviours in future research studies, including the measurement of topographies of challenging behaviour, behavioural severity, behavioural frequency, and behavioural function.

The primary aim of the current study was to explore the impact of exposure to aggressive/destructive topographies of challenging behaviour, on measures of stress, burnout, and work commitment among a sample of disability support workers in the UK. We also sought to examine the predictive power of age, working experience, experience of challenging behaviour, perceived stress, and work commitment for burnout among our sample. An additional aim was to compare the levels of burnout observed among our participants to those reported by previous studies conducted in North America (Hensel et al., 2012) and the UK (Mitchell & Hastings, 2001) in order to determine the generalizability of our results and to examine the consistency with which burnout is experienced by disability support workers in the UK and internationally.

This study contributed to the existing body of research on disability support worker stress in a number of ways. First, it employed a precise measure of both frequency and severity of aggressive behaviours experienced by staff. Such externally-directed challenging behaviour has been demonstrated to impact staff more than other forms of challenging behaviour (Elgie & Hastings, 2002). Earlier studies employed more general measures (e.g., Chung, Corbett, & Cumella, 1996; Jenkins et al., 1997) that may not have precisely determined the extent of the problem. Second, to our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the relationship between experience of challenging behaviour, perceived stress, and burnout and disability support workers' commitment to their work. High rates of turnover and absenteeism in this profession are extremely costly (e.g., Hewitt & Larson, 2007; Larson, Hewitt, & Anderson, 1999) and may negatively impact upon the quality of care that service users receive. The identification of factors that contribute to work commitment is therefore important for the development of interventions and procedures for staff retainment. Finally, there has been an increasing focus on interventions to improve the wellbeing of disability support workers in recent years (e.g., McConachie, McKenzie, Morris, & Walley, 2014; Oorsouw, Embregts, Bosman, & Jahoda, 2014). Thus, the assessment of current levels of stress and burnout among UK disability support workers is timely. Furthermore, the comparison of levels of burnout among our sample to those reported more than a decade ago (Hensel et al., 2012; Mitchell & Hastings, 2001) was provided.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants included 138 disability support staff (42 males, 96 females) working in 18 residential community homes within a large organization dedicated to serving adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the UK. Each residential home had multiple clients that engaged in varying frequencies of challenging behaviour. Participants' mean age was 41.4 years (SD = 12.52; range 19–68 years). The mean length of employment experience with persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities was 8.1 years (SD = 8.4 years; range 0–41 years).